

Only native speakers should teach ESL?

In your edition of Aug. 20-Sep. 2, you published a letter from Penny Purdy responding to a previous story about Bellevue ESL teacher Grace Seo losing her teaching position allegedly because she was not a native English speaker. Purdy was amazed to learn that someone other than a native English speaker was teaching ESL.

Purdy cites and defends the policy at the language school where she studies which states that only native speakers will provide language instruction. According to her, the non-native language teacher's "command of idioms, grammar, etc (sic) is not perfect." Although she is sympathetic to Seo's plight, Purdy feels that she is "not the right one to be teaching English to students who will copy her errors of usage and pronunciation."

In a telling passage, Purdy takes a gratuitous swipe at the editorial staff of the International Examiner for some grammatical errors and assumes that they are non-native speakers of English as well. The editors respond that the staff does indeed consist of American native speakers.

Purdy's biased and condescending conclusion about the ethnic and cultural composition of the editorial staff is totally logical given her erroneous premises about second language acquisition and teaching. Her understanding of second language theory is more informed by marketing principles than by pedagogical research and experience.

I wish to refer your readers to the article "When the Teacher is a Non-native Speaker" by Peter Medgyes in *Teaching English as Second or Foreign Language* (3rd ed.) edited by Marianne Celce-Murcia, and published by Heinle & Heinle. Medgyes reviews some of the literature and current discussions about this complex issue.

In general, the non-native English speaking teacher (or NNEST) brings a lot of value to the language learning classroom. While it is true, as Purdy states, that these teachers may not have the ready repertoire of idioms and expressions to teach their students, they more than make up for this deficiency in many other areas

of instruction. Medgyes lists six general pedagogical advantages exhibited by NNESTs. Namely, “they can:

1. provide a [successful] foreign language learner model;
2. teach language-learning strategies more effectively;
3. supply more information about the English language;
4. better anticipate and prevent language difficulties;
5. be more sensitive to their students;
6. benefit from their ability to use the students’ mother tongue” (436).

Medgyes contrasts this advantageous pedagogical situation of NNESTs with the poor treatment they receive from English language schools around the world. Schools promise to teach native fluency. It is not an exaggeration to say that in many countries blonde backpackers with little or no teacher preparation will receive preferential treatment and pay in teaching institutions, while trained and experienced local teachers receive the opposite.

Purdy is very nearly correct when she says that “someone who learns a foreign language after childhood never acquires native proficiency.” In fact, a few do. But most don’t. Chances are Purdy won’t. But that doesn’t stop school operators from promising or hyping the promise of native fluency by parading native English speaking teachers or by restricting the teaching staff to native speakers.

Medgyes concludes his article with a discussion of the “ideal English language teacher: native speaker or non-native speaker?” But, in fact, that figure is elusive. Perhaps it is better to speak of the “ideal English language teaching staff.” Medgyes cites promising experiences with mixtures of language teaching styles and techniques including team teaching that deserve more promotion.

Finally, Purdy believes that somewhere there is a native speaker of English teaching English perfectly without grammatical errors and with a full body of English idioms and expressions. This person knows and uses all the correct verb tenses and aspects, knows all the varieties of English spoken in the United States, and can avoid a solecism on a dime. According to her, anything less has to be a non-native speaker. I teach ESL. I consider myself a native speaker of English, and I revel

in my malapropisms and solecisms. But before I ever go looking for some mythical English teaching White Knight on a Horse, I will be honored to work shoulder to shoulder with the Grace Seo's of the world.

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